

A Note About a Name: why we use John “Diggs-Dorsey”

The second documented victim of a lynching in Montgomery County was a man most newspaper articles referred to as John Diggs. It was stated by many newspaper reports that he had several “aliases” including John Dorsey, John Williams, and that he alternately used the given name Henry, but it is unclear where that information about his name(s) originated. In the 1880 census, he was indicated as living with or near James and Mary Tschiffely (pronounced “Shiff-AY-lee”), for whom he worked, and was enumerated as John Dorsey.¹ The census also indicated John Dorsey was illiterate, yet later reports stated he received a letter from his father, and one report from the lynching event quoted him as saying he had written letters to several people, explaining his situation.² It’s possible that the census-taker was given the information about John Dorsey by his employer rather than by the man himself, which brings the accuracy of the census information into question. Concurrently, several newspapers—including the local *Sentinel*—told his story beginning with the name John Diggs (used once) but then referred to him as Dorsey for the remainder of the article, suggesting that was the name he used locally.³ At this time, historians have no concrete evidence of his physical location or his family origins prior to 1880, and no direct information supporting a hypothesis for which name he identified with, or preferred. For this reason, we have chosen to refer to him as “John Diggs-Dorsey,” honoring both names in an attempt to represent his identity as fully as is possible, from a remove of 140 years.

	Sarah	W	36	Wife	1	Keeping House
	Jackson Anne	B	25	Servant		Servant
	Jackson Henry	B	7	Daughter	1	
	Heavis Henry	B	7 1/2	Son	1	
	Jackson John	B	17	Servant	1	Works on Farm ✓
	Carter William	B	27	Boarder		Works on Farm ✓
8	Tschiffely James	W	36		1	Farmer ✓
	Mary	W	30	Wife	1	Keeping House ✓
9	Dorsey John	B	23	Servant	1	Laborer ✓

Note D.—In making entries in columns 9, 10, 11, 12, 16 to 23, an affirmative mark only will be used—thus /, except in the case of divorced persons, column 11, when the letter “E” is used.
 Note E.—Question No. 22 will only be asked in cases where an affirmative answer has been given either to question 10 or to question 11.

1880 census enumeration page from Montgomery County, Maryland, showing entries for James and Mary Tschiffely (pink highlight) and for John Dorsey (yellow highlight).

Source: *United States Federal Census: Population Schedule, 1880*, www.ancestry.com (August 15, 2019).

¹ William N. Hurley, Jr. (transcribed), *1880 Population Census of Montgomery County, Maryland*, (Bowie, MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 1999), 431.

² “Suspended at Sunrise,” *The Washington Post*, July 28, 1880.

³ “A Fiendish Outrage,” *Montgomery County Sentinel*, July 30, 1880.